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**The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
Transcribed by [Name]**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

**Debra Martin, 57, Vinton, Iowa
Karla Ice
Vinton Iowa
2-18-11**

Karla Ice: The narrator for this interview is Debra Martin. She's in Vinton, Iowa. The location of the interview is at her home in Vinton. The date is February 18, 2011. The time is about 10:10 am. My name is Karla Ice and this is the first

time that Debra and I have met. The purpose of the interview is that it is part of the Iowa Department for the Blind's History of Blindness in Iowa, Oral History Project. And, Debra could I have your consent to have this interview recorded?

Debra Martin: Yes, definitely.

Ice: Okay, very good. Then let's start, if you don't mind my asking, your age, place of birth just some basic information like that.

Martin: My age is 57. My place of birth was Bloomfield, Iowa. That's up in Southern Iowa.

Ice: Okay, and your family, did you have brothers and sisters?

Martin: Yes, I had four brothers; well I still have them, (Laughter) four brothers and one sister.

Ice: Okay, and what was the cause of your blindness and how old were you when you became blind?

Martin: Well, that's interesting. I was born blind, but the doctors didn't realize it for a few months; they just thought I was cross-eyed. Apparently, they couldn't judge those things as well as they can now. But anyway, when they determined that I was blind, well my Mom knew. She'd been around with somebody who had Rubella and so they believed that was why I went blind. And, that idea was supported by the fact that as I grew older, it became apparent that I had a

natural immunity to measles. So, knowing what they knew, they always said it wouldn't be hereditary, but then when I had my second child she was born just like I was. So, then the doctors knew that the first doctors had figured that out wrong. However, it wasn't wasted. At least that had happened to me because they did surgeries on me, and on other people who had the same sort of problem, and the surgeries never worked back then for anybody. I knew several, quite a few who had the same sort of thing, and nobody was really able to see very much or at all. But, when my daughter was born they had it more perfected. So, they did surgery on her and, of course, they knew she was blind right away the day she was born. So, they did the surgery on her when she was about 12 days old because they wanted it as soon as possible, and it worked for her; she's actually able to drive.

Ice: Okay, what about your childhood. You grew up on a farm?

Debra: Yes, I did; several farms actually. We started out here in Southern Iowa. We were renting, but my parents wanted me to have a normal family life. So, when I went to the Braille school they moved to Northern Iowa to be close and they rented a farm up there. And then, we rented a few farms around that area 'till I was 16; then they bought a farm back in Southern Iowa. So, yeah, I grew up as a farm person until I was about 21.

Ice: And, what about your childhood on the farm, doing chores and all of that?

Martin: It was exciting. Yeah, there were certain things that had to be done. I was supposed to gather eggs, feed chickens and chicks. Sometimes, if we had horses that weren't in the pasture, I was supposed to give them hay and water and various things like that. When I got old enough, sometimes I did babysitting. I was the oldest in my family, so I had my fair share to do.

Ice: And, I believe you had a pony?

Martin: Oh, yeah! My first pony I got when I was seven. I kind of whined and begged and my Dad bought me a pony, but she was a yearling filly that wasn't hardly halter broke and had never been ridden. And, he just casually said, "Well, once she's broke you'll know how to ride." And, I did, and I knew how to fall also. (Laughter) But, I could stay on a horse by then.

Ice: Do you know how long it took you to break that horse? How long did you work with it?

Martin: It really didn't take all that long. Its funny, Shetland ponies, even the ones that are about half tame, they have a pretty calm temperament about being ridden really. So, breaking her really wasn't all that difficult. Now, when my Dad got a horse of his own, she was another yearling filly that had never been rode and wasn't halter broke, and he asked me if I wanted to help break her, and now, that was a lot harder. She didn't have a calm temperament.

Ice: Okay, so when you were riding your pony did you ride with a saddle or bareback or?

Martin: Both, saddle or bareback; depending.

Ice: And so, you saddled up the horse and everything yourself?

Martin: I knew how to bridle a pony. I wasn't much good at putting the saddle on. I guess I could have learned, but I didn't. Usually, my Dad saddled her.

Ice: Anything else you'd like to tell about your childhood on the farm? Did you help with gardening, with shelling peas or stuff like that?

Martin: Oh, yeah. I did help with shelling peas. I was the main one to do that, mostly because I enjoyed it, and I snapped beans. I did those things; I enjoyed them. I'd sit and watch my little cartoons and snap beans or shell peas and that was fine with me.

Ice: Anything else about your childhood that comes to mind?

Martin: Well, of course, I went to the Braille school from the time I was five 'till 16. So, that was a big part of my childhood. Because of that, I would say I was raised differently than my brothers and sisters because I spent a lot of time at the Braille school. They were just raised by our parents. So, I would say in some ways that did cause me to be a bit different from them, see things differently because I lived in two different worlds. So, that was an interesting part of my childhood.

Ice: Back then, did you stay at the blind school all the time, or did you go home on weekends?

Martin: I did go home on weekends and vacations. Sometimes I brought girls home with me that didn't get to go home very often, or maybe we were just good friends. And, of course, we had to write letters back and forth to the parents and get my parent's permission and their parents' permission, but it was something that went on at the Braille school a lot. So, the house parents kind of expected it and, you know, it wasn't a big problem.

Ice: What were some of the subjects you took at the Braille school?

Martin: I took the usual subjects. Of course, instead of learning to read print, I started learning Braille at the normal age that kids learned to read back then. Instead of learning to write with a pencil, I learned with a Braille writer. But, apart from that the subjects were pretty normal, math, history; all the usual sorts of things that children take in school.

Ice: And then, what about when you got to high school? What kinds did that...the subjects typical high school subjects, too?

Martin: Yes, they really were. There wasn't too much difference. So, when I went on to public school, as far as my education goes, it wasn't really a very difficult transition because that had been similar enough. But, of course, the

difficult transition was that the normal teenage culture was very, very different from the way we were at the Braille school. So, that was different.

Ice: And, what grade was it that you started going to public school?

Martin: I started public school in my junior year, 11th grade. So, by then yeah all the different clicks and such had been formed and I was new girl. And, I can't say that I really got along socially all that well, but I found out quickly enough that a lot of other children who went to the Braille school and then changed to public school had the same problems. So, at least I knew it wasn't just me, so that helped.

Ice: Yes, and did you have further education following high school?

Martin: Yes, I did go on to college. At first I went to junior college. I thought that would be a pretty easy transition then, but then my last two years, to get my real degree, I spent in a larger college, the college in Kirksville. And, that's where I got my degree in Psychology.

Ice: And, you were planning to have a career in that field at that time?

Martin: Yeah, that was my basic intention. As a matter of fact, after I graduated I was offered a job which would have been quite interesting. I'm sure that normally I would have took them up on their offer. Well, at least it was an interview for a job, anyway. I would have been a parole

officer for teenage girls. And, they knew I was blind so, you know, they knew going in what, you know. And, it didn't seem to bother them that I was, so I probably stood a pretty good chance. But, it just so happened that I got engaged right then, and my husband-to-be was making good money, and he kind of hoped I'd stay home and raise children. So, I didn't take them up on their offer, and I did marry him. (Laughter) So, I didn't actually have any employment then from my degree.

Ice: Okay, and your first child was born, and that was another transition.

Martin: Oh, yes; it always is! (Laughter) Doesn't matter if you're blind or not; that's always another transition. But, I did one thing that I'm sure sighted people would not do, but I found it a good idea. When I had my first one, of course, like all babies she woke up during the night hungry, or being changed, or maybe she just wanted to be held. And, I would do those things, but I wanted to encourage her to sleep. So, I left all the lights off and she and I did it totally in the dark, and it worked. It did teach her the difference between day and night, and she learned to sleep through the night quite early for a baby.

Ice: That sounds like a great idea. What about when your first child was born...your mother came to help you a while at first?

Martin: Oh, she'd visit for a few minutes about every day or every other day, but I can't say that she really stayed around a lot to help. She kind of watched, maybe, and made sure I

was doing alright, but and I was...it's funny, I took to it pretty well. So, yeah, it was nice to, you know, know that she was there. And, she was a real good Grandma, but she didn't really need to help me a whole lot.

Ice: And, how did you...then you were married again later, and how did you meet your second husband?

Martin: Well, I was divorced before I ever met my second husband. And, my second husband was the pre-school teacher of Wendy, the daughter of my first husband. So, that's how we met.

Ice: And, then you moved to Vinton?

15:00

Martin: Eventually, we did. Now, we lived in Southern Iowa for a while because that's where he worked, but yeah, eventually we did move back to Vinton, which is where a lot of his family is and where he grew up. And, he got a job at the Braille school where he had worked before. So, they knew him, so getting the job was pretty easy. And then, I've spent the rest of my life here in Vinton.

Ice: And, you have grandchildren now and...

Martin: Oh, yes I have three, three girls and one on the way. That one isn't far enough along to know what it is yet, but we know it's definitely on the way.

Ice: Okay. And, they all live in this area?

Martin: Yes, they do. Well, they're all from my oldest daughter. She's married and lives in Center Point. My younger one is also married, but she's going to nursing college. She's going through a program in nursing, so she doesn't want to have children just yet; and she's in Cedar Rapids.

Ice: Okay. And now, what are some of the techniques that you use in homemaking or things like that? And, also there's a story, I believe, about your house being in a tornado.

Martin: Oh, yeah. Okay, as far as technology that I use, I have my microwave marked with tape. That's, you know, a little unusual technique that I use, but so many of the buttons now aren't really buttons. They're just, you know, something you can see but not feel, so marking things like that with bits of glue or tape is always a good idea. And, I do have what is Caller Reporter. It's sold at Radio Shack, and it lets me know if somebody comes close to any of our doors, and that's real handy.

And as far as the tornado...Well, that happened during my first marriage. My husband was gone because he worked on the railroad, and so sometimes he wasn't able to come home at night because he was working that far away. And so, it was early in the morning and I'd actually been through a few tornados before. This area seems to attract them. So, I woke up with the uneasy feeling that something was very wrong with the weather and I turned on the radio to the local station, but it didn't tell me a thing that was wrong. So, I thought maybe I was just imagining. Well, then eventually I actually heard it approaching, and so I lay down

by my bed and I said I hope I can just ride this out; maybe I'll get lucky. Well, eventually, of course, the wind hit the trailer house and it rocked a couple of times and then it, and me, sailed up!

Ice: Oh, no.

Martin: And, I really thought I was going to die; I just hoped it wouldn't hurt too much. I hoped it would be quick. Well, it wasn't too long and the trailer house and I landed hard. I didn't know it yet, but I had a broken back and the trailer house was kindling. Now, for some reason the tornado didn't strike my sister's trailer house, even though she lived just practically next door, but that's the way it is sometimes. And, she looked out and saw my trailer house was kindling, and she got all hysterical. Well, it just so happened there was a friend of ours there, well a couple friends...and anyway, one of them went out looking for me and found me. And then, I had to be taken to the hospital when they found out I had the broken back. But, anyway, that's my tornado story.

Ice: Okay. That is quite a story. I think you have a story about your little recorder device.

Martin: Yeah, it's a Reporter.

Ice: Reporter, yes.

Martin: Yeah, because it reports to me when somebody's near a door. Yeah, one morning, about 2 a.m., I wasn't sleeping well. So, I was downstairs, and I call it my beeper,

the beeper went off, and well, I knew that wasn't good news. Beepers aren't supposed to go off at 2 a.m. So, I was listening and I heard a definite noise at the front door, made by somebody I was sure, and I flew up those stairs. I went up so fast my feet didn't hardly touch the ground, and I said, "Bill, I believe somebody's trying to break in. The beeper went off and I heard somebody at the door." He was just as calm as could be. He came down, looked out; saw foot prints in the snow, so he called the police. They came and they followed the foot prints, and they followed them 'till they found this guy. He wasn't all that far away still, and he was drunk, evidently celebrating New Years a little early. And, anyway, it turned out this guy had been angry at somebody else, so the noise I heard was him breaking our Christmas lights to get even with this other person that he was angry at. But, anyway, I think the Reporter would be a handy thing for any blind person who lives in a house, especially if they live alone. It would be nice to know any time anybody's near your door that isn't the type that would ring a door bell.

Ice: Yes, that's for sure. Okay, and while you were at the Braille school, obviously, you learned Braille and that has been very important to you all your life. Can you tell some of the applications of that?

Martin: Of course. Well, I read Braille books, of course, and magazines. And, I'm a very good speller which, of course, I wouldn't be if I didn't know how to read Braille. And, I know how to play card games and that's really been a big enjoyment in my life. And, I always read to my children when they were young. And, my youngest one enjoyed me

reading to her 'till she was almost about 13. And so, that was something my children would have missed if I couldn't have read to them. I think those are probably the most important applications that reading has been to me.

Ice: Do you use Braille for things like recipes, or such?

Martin: I don't just because it takes up too much space, so I record recipes onto my voice recorder. It's a little sliver of a machine that has a computer chip inside and holds a lot of hours of space. That's something else I would recommend for blind people. Much easier for storing recipes than Braille books.

Ice: And, are there any other comments you have about technology for blind people, or how things have changed for blind people over the years, in terms of employment opportunities or other aspects?

Martin: Well, I believe, and this is just what I've heard on the news, but according to what I've heard the employment opportunities for blind people right now are not so good. I mean, even worse than normal because there's lots of sighted people clambering for jobs. And, the truth is most employers, given a choice, will still hire a sighted person if there's a qualified one available, and that's a pity, but it's true. And so, I'd say for a blind person right now, getting employed is not easy.

Ice: And, do you have any other comments about your life as a blind person in Iowa; either your family life or education?

Martin: Nothing really comes to mind. I think that Iowa is, was, a good place for me to be blind if I have to be blind. Nobody wants that, but if that's the way it is, I think Iowa's a good place. I think the Commission for the Blind is excellent the way they are very prompt when it comes to sending out books, and they have a big collection. And so, that has been a big part of my life for many years.

Ice: And, are you involved in community activities here in Vinton?

Martin: Somewhat. Not to any great degree. Mostly, Bill and I just kind of socialize with neighbors or family or friends, you know.

Ice: Sure, okay. Well, thank you so much for your time and we'll conclude our interview.

Martin: All right, you're welcome!

26:14

(End of Recording)

Beverly Tietz

5-6-11